FEATURE

Race and Exclusion in State Socialism: African Students in Communist Albania

Fabio Bego | BIRN | March 22, 2023 08:25

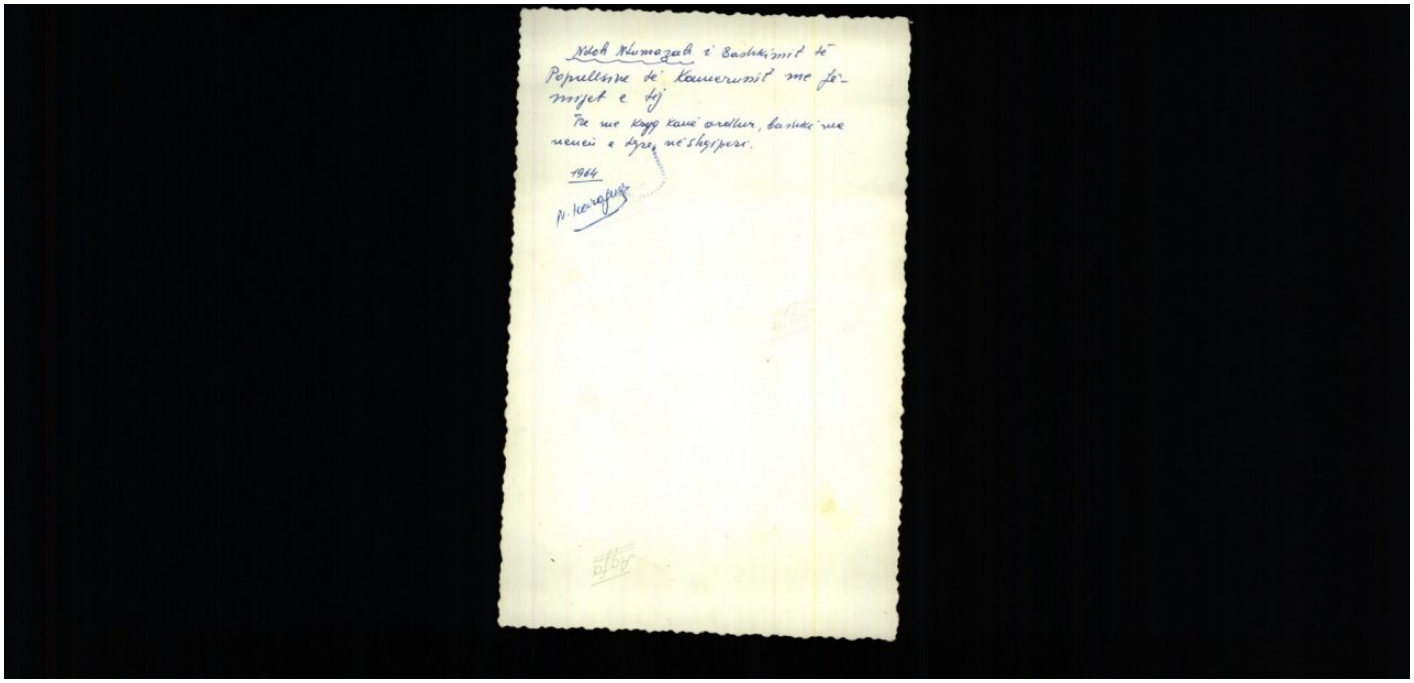
Albania once opened its doors to the children of anti-colonial figures in Africa, but they still faced suspicion and marginalisation.

In Albania, recent waves of migration from Africa have raised questions about notions of hospitality and racism in the country.

Encounters between Albanians and Africans in Western Europe accentuate the ethno-racial distinction between ‘diasporic’ communities as they struggle for recognition and resources.

But how, in the past, did communist ideology mediate relations between Albanians and Africans?

Albanian ties to anti-colonial figures



The note on the back of the pictures with Ndeh Ntumazah and his children. Photo: Archive photo.

Socialist Albania was a vocal supporter of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and established relations with several newly independent states. Symbols of the independence movements such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Haile Selassie of Ethiopia visited Albania.

The end of colonial rule in the early 1960s coincided with the deterioration of Chinese and Soviet relations and the rupture of Albanian-Soviet relations. Albania strengthened its relations with China in an attempt to forge a front against Western capitalism and the Soviet 'revisionist' influence in Africa.

Through diplomats in Accra, the Albanian Labour Party established links with members of the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon, UPC, Abel Kingue and Ndeh Ntumazah. In order to support their struggle against the neo-colonial regime in Cameroon, Albanians hosted Ntumazah's children and wife in 1964. Three years later, in 1967, Albania became the permanent residence of the children of Elise Osendé, who was most likely the wife of the Osendé Afana. Afana, also of the UPC, was killed in combat in 1966.

The Albanian embassy in Algeria served as a contact point with Congolese

activists. After being told by a Cuban colleague about the exploits of Che Guevara in Congo, the Albanian ambassador in Algiers recommended that the government in Tirana host three Congolese students who had been expelled from Belgium for political reasons, as well as the wife and child of one of them. The students were advised to go to Albania by Jacques Grippa, leader of the Communist Party of Belgium, who planned to go to the country for holidays.

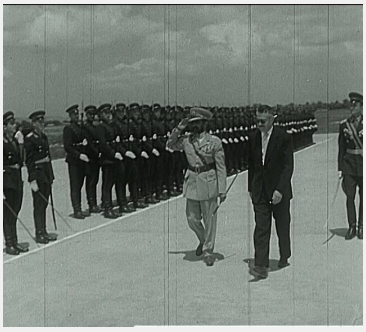
Several Congolese students and activists travelled to Albania in the mid-1960s.

In 1966, the year after the coup that brought Mobutu to power, 15 Congolese children and one Ugandan-born child arrived in Albania. Among them was the child of revolutionary activist Willem-Emmanuel Kabasu Babo.

Kabasu Babo travelled to Tirana in 1967 with Constantin-Marie Kibwe and Thomas Mukwid. In the Albanian capital they struck a deal to form a Marxist-Leninist party that was founded in Congo as the Communist Party of Congo. Babo returned to Albania in 1970, enquiring about the conditions of the Congolese children, and asked the Albanian government for financial and logistical support in return for diamonds, gold, uranium, mercury and cocaine.

The government rejected the request as Babo had been expelled from his party due to alleged pro-Soviet leanings.

Coming of age in 1970s Albania



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The Congolese and Cameroonian children were between the ages of two and 15 when they arrived in Albania. They grew up without their parents, some of whom were killed in fighting.

Until the mid-1970s, the Albanian authorities paid them little attention, but interest picked up when most were in their teens and some began to show disruptive tendencies.

In 1974-75, local communist party leaders in Vlore, on the Adriatic coast, complained about the “unpleasant behaviour” of the “Congolese” youth José [‘Zhose’ or ‘Zhozef’ in the Albanian archives] Makanga and Vitali Pakasa, 15 and 16 years old respectively.

The pair stood accused of skipping school, socialising with “degenerate elements” among “our youth” and of being violent and verbally abusive. They were also said to be following Western fashion and music.

The archival documents contain traces of the lingering politics of marginalisation. In one letter, the racist term “blacky” [zezak] is used in reference to Pakasa and Makanga.

According to Vlore communist leaders, both youths should have been put to work like all other immigrants or expelled from the country. The pair rejected the accusations; Makanga protested about their treatment and both asked local authorities to either send them back to Congo or put them in jail.

Makanga’s emotional state deteriorated to the point that he cut his veins with a piece of glass. He wrote to communist leader Enver Hoxha to denounce his treatment by Albanian authorities, but the letter is missing from the archives.

In 1978, a report of the Ministry of Instruction and Culture acknowledged that local authorities had marginalised the Congolese children, saying they had arrived in Albania at a very young age but were treated as foreigners and felt it.

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The African teenagers in Elbasan had a similar experience. In April 1975, local communist authorities complained about inappropriate behaviour by Joseph [‘Zhozef’ in the archives] Osendé, the son of Elise Osendé, and Jean Mate [‘Zhan Mate/Mat’ in the archives].

The two had praised the Soviet Union. Osendé, who used to live there, claimed that young people had more opportunities for entertainment. Osendé skipped

school and spent his time reading novels, playing ping pong and listening to music on the radio. Local authorities recommended that the “African” students be sent away because they were “undesired”.

Moneng Charles [‘Mon Eng Sharl’ in the archives], an older student, caught the attention of Albanian authorities in 1976.

According to the Ministry of Interior, Charles spread revisionist literature and propagandised decadent Western music and ways of life. He had committed “immoral” acts with many Albanian and foreign girls and had relationships with the personnel of the Polish and Bulgarian embassies, the ministry claimed.

Charles was expelled from Albania on 27 January 1977, two and a half months shorts of securing a diploma in medicine. Before boarding the plane, Charles gave the agents escorting him a tape with a message for Hoxha.

Appearing to speak on behalf of all Congolese students, Charles rejected the allegations against him but said that he would be grateful to Albania. He also mentioned that he often felt alone in the country, and asked the party to take care of the other Congolese because they could accomplish more than him.

Impact limited to international relations

Albanian communists pay respects at the tomb of the late communist dictator Enver Hoxha in the public cemetery in Tirana, Albania, 11 April 2016. On the 31st anniversary of the hardline Stalinist dictator's death, Hoxha still remains a respected figure by many Albanians. EPA/ARMANDO BABANI

The spread of communist movements and the end of colonial regimes established forms of solidarity that challenged the racist ideology characterising relations between Europeans and Africans.

However, the effects of communist movements were limited to the level of foreign and international relations. They did not affect the intimate structures of socialist society where foreigners and some minority groups continued to be marginalised on account of their ethnic and racial background.

This demonstrates the limits of state-induced politics of inclusion and shines a light on past and present forms of solidarity between Albanian and African citizens that go beyond institutionalised spaces and relations.

Fabio Bego is a scholar and researcher of nationalism and the far-right.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of BIRN.